AIR OPERATIONS IN THE SOUTH-WEST PACIFIC AREA 1941-45

GREGORY P. GILBERT

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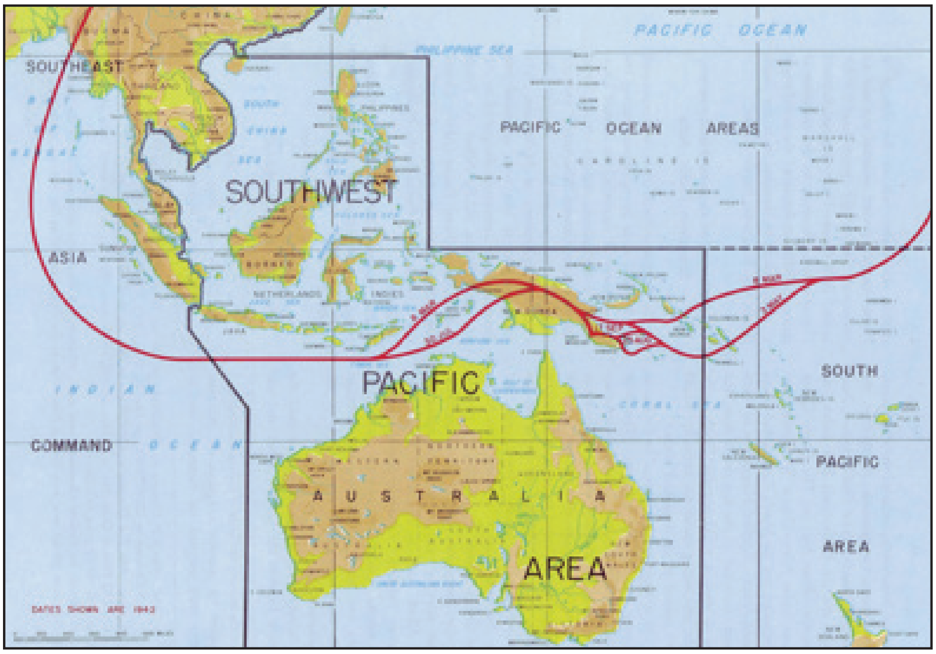
This paper is an expanded version of a seminar that was presented on behalf of the Air Power Development Centre on Wednesday, 20 March 2013. It is intended to raise awareness of the air perspective among members of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) and the wider community, in addition to Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) personnel.

The period 2-4 March 2013 marked the 70th anniversary of the Battle of the Bismarck Sea in 1943, which, although one of the most important air actions fought by Australians in the Pacific, remains little known and little understood outside a small group of RAAF veterans and scholars of air power history. Today's seminar should help to place the Battle of the Bismarck Sea within its broader historical context. I shall do this by discussing the application of air power within the framework of Australia's maritime strategy during the war in the South-West Pacific Area (SWPA).

This seminar briefly examines some of the major issues surrounding the operations of Allied and Japanese air forces during the war in the SWPA from 1941 to 1945. As control of the air in the maritime environment often involved naval forces during World War II, I will mention sea power from time to time. I will not discuss the land power aspects of the campaign; they were also important but certain features of the SWPA land campaign are probably well known to most Australians already.

The Pacific War was mostly expeditionary for the Australian armed forces. The SWPA campaign was fought across Papua, New Guinea, the Netherlands East Indies (now Indonesia) to the Philippines, and thus was clearly expeditionary in nature.

The public perception of the SWPA campaign, as a land-centric campaign, is wrong. In this seminar I will show that the SWPA campaign, 1941-45, was unique for its time. It was a maritime campaign in which air power was the key force in the application of military power, and where sea and land power were largely used in support. The prerequisite for Allied offensive operations against the Japanese in the SWPA was air and sea control.

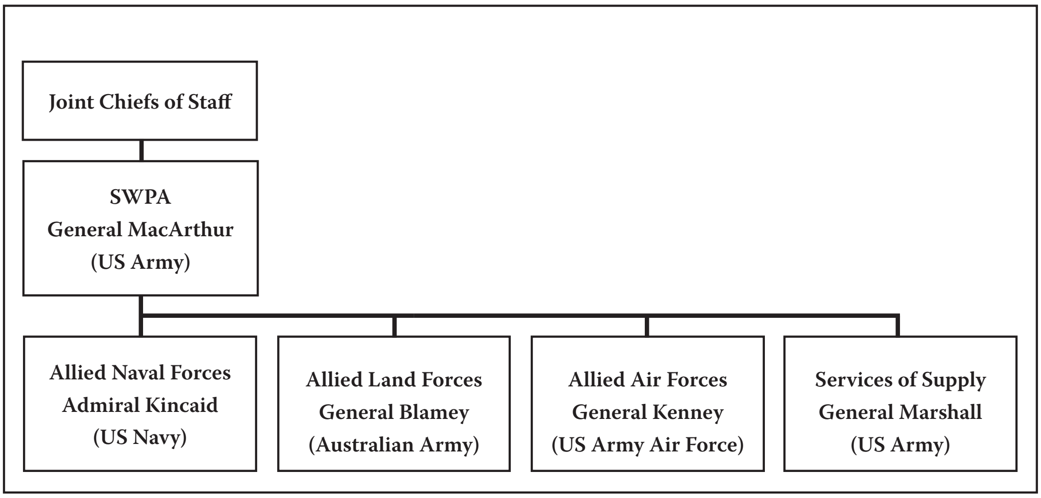


The SWPA

(*Reports of General MacArthur*, Vol. I, 1950, p. 31)

In early 1942 the Allied Joint Chiefs decided to create separate theatre commands for the war in the Pacific. The Pacific Ocean area was under United States Navy (USN) command with Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, USN, responsible for all forces in the northern and central Pacific as well as the South Pacific Area (SOPAC). The SWPA was placed under United States Army command with General Douglas MacArthur as Allied Commander-in-Chief SWPA, effectively the joint force commander. In modern terminology MacArthur's SWPA command was combined (including forces from more than one nation) and joint (including forces from more than one Service). Under MacArthur there were three component commanders—General George C. Kenney for Allied Air Forces SWPA, Admiral Thomas C. Kincaid for Allied Naval Forces SWPA and General Thomas Blamey for Allied Land Forces SWPA.

Unlike Allied commands elsewhere in the SWPA, General MacArthur was in effect the only joint commander. He used his General Headquarters (GHQ), known by some as 'the Bataan Gang', for all operational planning. His operational orders were then worked into three distinct Service operational plans by single Service staffs that 'cooperated' to achieve the results. In practice, MacArthur preferred to directly order his ground force commanders at the task force (or corps) level, rather than go through General Blamey. General Kenney led the air campaign, with Air Vice-Marshal William Bostock as Air Officer Commanding (AOC) RAAF Command.


Joint Chiefs of Staff
SWPA General MacArthur (US Army)
Allied Naval Forces Admiral Kincaid (US Navy)
Allied Land Forces General Blamey (Australian Army)
Allied Air Forces General Kenney (US Army Air Force)
Services of Supply General Marshall (US Army)

Command Structure for the SWPA

Shortly after the United States Army Air Forces (USAAF) General George C. Kenney took up his position as Commander Allied Air Forces SWPA, he was able to convince General MacArthur, the other commanders and his staff of the importance of air power in the SWPA and perhaps more importantly of the maritime nature of their operating environment. He summed up the underlying principles of what was to become famous as MacArthur's 'island hopping' campaign.

> In the Pacific theatre we have a number of islands garrisoned by small forces. These islands are nothing more than aerodromes or aerodrome areas from which modern fire-power is launched. … Port Moresby, Lae and Buna are all on the island of New Guinea, but the only practicable way to get from one island to another is by air or by water: they are all islands as far as warfare is concerned. Each is garrisoned by a small force and each can be taken by a small force once local air control is secured. Every time one of these islands is taken, the rear is better secured and the emplanements for the flying artillery are advanced closer and closer to Japan itself.[1]

Kenney's strategic outlook made it into MacArthur's official theatre strategy:

> The general scheme of maneuver [sic] is to … employ air forces … to soften up and to gain air superiority over the initial attack objectives along the two axes; neutralize with appropriate aviation [the] supporting hostile air bases and destroy hostile naval forces and shipping within range; move land forces forward covered by air and naval forces to obtain first objectives (existing and potential hostile air bases) and consolidate same; displace aviation forward onto captured airdromes.
>
> This process is repeated to successive objectives, neutralizing by air action, or by air, land and sea action, intermediate hostile installations which are not objectives of immediate attack.
>
> The entire movement will be covered by air attack on Japanese air and sea bases … with the objective of interrupting and denying sea supply and/or support or reinforcement of objectives under attack.[2]

USAAF General George C. Kenney, Commander Allied Air Forces SWPA, looks over model of Rabaul

(USAAF)

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[1] Douglas Gillison, *Australia in the War of 1939-1945 - Series 3 (Air) - Volume I - Royal Australian Air Force, 1939-1942*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1962, p. 636.

[2] General Headquarters Southwest Pacific Area, '*ELKTON' III*, Plan for the Seizure and Occupation of the Lae, Salamaua, Madang, Western New Britain, Solomons Areas, 26 April 1943, available at http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USA/USA-P-Strategy/Strategy-V.html, accessed 6 May 2013.

For air operations in the SWPA, General Kenney's priorities were simple:

1. Attain control of the air.
2. Interdict the Japanese forces.
3. Provide close air support (CAS) to Allied ground forces.

While looking at the big picture it is necessary to remember that behind the scenes the SWPA campaign was decided by logistics. The ability to move US troops, equipment, and materiel across the world as well as within theatre was critical to sustained operations. The 'Europe first' strategy adopted by the Allied Joint Chiefs of Staff and agreed by the great wartime democratic leaders, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and United States President Franklin D. Roosevelt, meant that the SWPA was low on the list of strategic priorities. Even within the Pacific, Nimitz's Central Pacific strategy had a higher priority than the other Pacific areas such as Burma-India-China, SOPAC and SWPA.

Any losses amongst shipping or aircraft bound for Australia represented an unacceptable loss to the ability to conduct combat operations in Papua, New Guinea or elsewhere in the SWPA. To keep the Allied logistics system moving it was necessary for large numbers of Australian aircraft and naval vessels to protect our sea communications. This effort intensified during early 1943 when the Japanese launched a submarine offensive against shipping on Australia's eastern seaboard. We just could not afford to lose the few transports and merchant vessels that were sunk while moving through our waters.

It is also important to note that Allied air logistics, mostly American, developed and sustained air operations across the Pacific. The US Army Services of Supply (USASOS), under its commander General Richard J. Marshall, was responsible for all aspects of operational logistics in the SWPA. USASOS was supported by the logistics organisations forming part of each of the Australian Services and their links to Australian science and industry. In the SWPA, air logistics—which included maintenance and support personnel, new and replacement aircraft, spare parts, munitions and fuel supplies—was critical to the Allied victory. Australia, as a nation, generated considerable air logistics during the war, with extensive engineering and support effort including the Government Aircraft Factory, technical training and extensive depot level maintenance efforts. However, the United States was by far the main supplier of aircraft used in the SWPA. Larger, multi-engine aircraft were flown to Australia along the extensive air routes, while single-engine aircraft were largely transported on board US ships. Within theatre, American transport aircraft formed a major component of each USAAF air force (the 5th and 13th Air Forces) operating in the SWPA, whereas the limited number of Australian transport aircraft meant the RAAF had only a relatively small airlift capacity operating on routes over the Australian continent itself.

Now, the SWPA campaign started on 8 December 1941 and continued until the Japanese Emperor surrendered on 10 September 1945. The campaign included many military operations and countless missions/tasks. The Allied SWPA campaign can be separated into three distinct phases:

1. Allied denial operations—a defensive phase (December 1941 to July 1942).
2. Allied contested operations—an attrition phase (July 1942 to June 1943).
3. Allied offensive operations—a manoeuvre phase (June 1943 to September 1945).

Of course, the Japanese phases were the exact reverse—offensive, contested and denial.

It is worthwhile examining the major operations of each phase to identify common features of the war in the air as it transitioned from denial operations, through contested operations, and into offensive operations. While considering these phases, one should try and remember that it is also true that most Western air campaigns since 1991 have also involved a transition of air warfare from denial, through contested and into offensive operations, although unlike our World War II example, recent air campaigns have taken only a few days or even a few hours to proceed through the denial and contested phases. And in some recent campaigns denial, contested and offensive operations have been conducted concurrently along parallel strategic lines. This has been achieved due to the ability of Western coalition air forces to gain, maintain and sustain overwhelming air superiority over their adversaries. To some this success has meant that offensive air operations are at times taken for granted by some armed forces; however, the need to gain control of the air in denial and contested air operations has in no way disappeared.

The Allied defensive phase (December 1941 to July 1942) included the following major operations:

- Defeat in Malaya, Singapore and the Netherlands East Indies
- Fall of Rabaul
- Air Attacks upon Darwin and Broome
- Battles of Java Sea and Sunda Strait
- Loss of the Philippines
- Air Attacks on Japanese Invasion Convoy at Lae
- Defence of Moresby
- Battle of the Coral Sea
- Battle of Midway

Each of these operations involved Allied forces on land, sea and in the air attempting to deny the Japanese their offensive capability and by doing so to prevent them from achieving their strategic aims. The Japanese—having used surprise and skill to rapidly gain air and sea control—used manoeuvre to cause strategic paralysis to defeat their opponents. Air and sea control cleared the way for the Japanese amphibious operations that conquered much of the Pacific during the first few months of the Pacific War. A number of these major operations occurred outside the SWPA; however, they all had considerable strategic impact upon air operations in the SWPA.

Control of the air is defined as 'the ability to conduct friendly operations in the air and on the surface below it without interference from enemy air power'.[3] Today, control of the air remains a fundamental prerequisite for all ADF expeditionary operations. Attaining control of the air will depend upon the level of enemy air power, the level of ADF air power available and the air power contribution of allies and coalition partners. Control of the air is a basic requirement for any sea or airlift operation. As we will see later in this seminar, without control of the air the Japanese were unable to reinforce their soldiers and airmen at Lae due to their losses at the Battle of the Bismarck Sea in March 1943.

Sea control is defined as 'that condition which exists when one has freedom of action to use an area of sea for one's own purposes for a period of time and, if required, deny its use to an adversary'.[4] Sea control is very much a multidimensional concept for, if it to be effective, control must be exercised over the air space above the sea, the water column and the seabed below it, and through the electromagnetic spectrum. Naval forces did influence events at sea and ashore throughout the SWPA campaign but much of the naval strategy used by the Americans and Japanese was centred upon gaining sea superiority through a series of decisive battles which would influence all theatres in the Pacific War. Naval forces contributed directly to air operations in the SWPA when they deployed aircraft carriers to the area, particularly during the Battle of the Coral Sea.

The defence of Moresby (21 March to 9 May 1942) was a milestone in the Allied defensive phase. The heroic story of the resistance of No 75 Squadron RAAF against the Imperial Japanese Naval air strikes against Port Moresby and its airfields is well known. Less well known are the offensive strikes, conducted around the same time, against Japanese airfields in New Guinea and Rabaul, and the large intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance effort conducted in support of operations from air bases on mainland Australia. The need to construct and defend these advanced air bases was a major effort involving considerable effort by RAAF and USAAF personnel as well as from Commonwealth Government employees and contractors. The air logistics arrangements established to support the operational squadrons also involved considerable but often overlooked effort

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[3] Royal Australian Air Force, Australian Air Publication 1000-D—*The Air Power Manual*, Fifth Edition, Air Power Development Centre, Canberra, reprinted 2008, p. 168

[4] Royal Australian Navy, *Australian Maritime Doctrine: RAN Doctrine 1 - 2010*, Sea Power Centre - Australia, Canberra, 2010, p. 205.

The Battle of the Coral Sea (4-8 May 1942) was a turning point in the defence of Port Moresby. Japanese carrier and land-based aircraft failed to gain air and sea control in the approaches to Port Moresby. Each side lost an aircraft carrier as well as a large number of aircraft and aircrew; however the battle was a strategic defeat for the Japanese. Port Moresby held firm against the Japanese. A month later the Japanese naval air power was decisively defeated at the Battle of Midway when four fleet carriers were lost for one US Navy carrier lost. Although this did not destroy Japanese naval air power, it weakened it significantly and indirectly led to a period of attrition warfare and the commencement of contested operations around Guadalcanal and in Papua.

The Allied attrition phase (July 1942 to June 1943) included the following major operations:

- Guadalcanal—including the following battles:
  - Savo Island
  - Eastern Solomons
  - Cape Esperance
  - Santa Cruz Islands
  - Naval Battle of Guadalcanal
- Kokoda Trail
- Milne Bay
- Gona, Buna and Sananada
- Wau, Mubo and Salamaua
- Battle of the Bismarck Sea
- Convoys off Eastern Australia

Each of these operations involved Allied forces on land, sea and in the air fighting long drawn-out battles to weaken the Japanese. With neither side having a distinct advantage the fighting resembled the attrition warfare of the Western Front during World War I or perhaps the fighting between Germany and Russia on the Eastern Front in late 1942 and 1943. Casualties in the air, at sea and on land were high as each side struggled to use any temporary advantage for its own benefit even though neither side could achieve a significant strategic advantage.

Although often forgotten by many Australians, the Guadalcanal campaign—conducted in the SOPAC, not in SWPA—involved some of the most critical fighting of the Allied attrition phase. For the Japanese the SOPAC and the SWPA were inseparable, they were both within the Japan's South-East Area. A small number of RAAF personnel were directly involved at Guadalcanal but it was the highest priority for the Allied naval forces, including the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) operating in this part of the Pacific. The Guadalcanal campaign indirectly influenced events in the SWPA, ranging from the Japanese decision to withdraw from the Kokoda Trail before they reached Ioribaiwa (overlooking Port Moresby), to their decision to divert Japanese air strength to the fight over the Solomon Islands instead of their planned air offensive over Papua.

The fighting along the Kokoda Trail (July-November 1942) is a good example of such contested operations. The advance across the Owen Stanley Range was ordered because there were insufficient Allied air and naval forces available to protect the sea communications running around the Papuan coast. Without air and sea control, the Allies' ability to manoeuvre forces around Papua was severely restricted. Even if it were possible to cover a landing force during its approach in such an operation, it would have been impossible to support any fighting in the area or to sustain operations with additional supplies. The Kokoda fighting was not inevitable but it was the result of shortages in the air and naval forces allocated to the SWPA at the time.

The Milne Bay battle in September 1942 was again an example of attrition warfare. By this time, however, the Japanese forces had overreached and they were unable to dislodge the stronger Australian and American defenders. The close air support provided by the RAAF's No 77 and 78 Squadrons was decisive in defeating the Japanese ground offensive. However, the Allies could only maintain control of the air during the day and, due to the lack of strike aircraft, the Allies were unable to prevent the Japanese Navy from landing, reinforcing or even from evacuating from Milne Bay when the Australians had defeated their ground troops. This highlights the complexity of the contested operations where it was possible for the Allies to attain air and sea control for a specific time and at a certain place, but where complete victory was not achievable due to their inability to sustain that air and sea control. As an aside, Task Force 44 (TF44) of the Seventh Fleet, which included RAN cruisers and destroyers, was recalled from the Solomon Islands to the waters south of Milne Bay after the Japanese invasion. By the time they arrived the Japanese had withdrawn but the presence of TF44 helped convince the Japanese that they could no longer send their naval vessels into adjacent waters. With the return of the Allied naval vessels and the concurrent build-up of land-based air forces, the Japanese bases in southern Papua were increasingly blockaded by the Allies.

Within the current ADF, **blockade** is defined as 'an operation intended to disrupt the enemy's economy by preventing ships of all nations from entering or leaving specified coastal areas under the occupation or control of the enemy'.[5] From the point of view of the SWPA campaign, the strategy was to use Allied air and naval forces to impose a series of blockades against the Japanese advanced bases. The implementation of this strategy led to many Japanese soldiers, sailors and airmen being cut off from their logistic support; in effect, being left to wither on the vine. This approach was very effective as was acknowledged by one of the Japanese commanders who would have preferred to have died in combat than be forced, half-starved, to surrender at the end of the war. One of the few Japanese survivors of Buna was later to admit that 'We lost ... because we could not supply our troops and because our navy and air force could not disrupt the enemy supply line'.

Air superiority is defined as 'that degree of dominance in the air battle over the adversary which permits the conduct of operations by friendly land, sea and air forces at a given place and time'.[6] Without air superiority it was impossible for either the Japanese or the Allies to take full advantage of local successes or minor victories. During the year of attrition operations in the SWPA, July 1942 to June 1943, the initial Japanese advantage in the air operations was reduced and by early 1943 Allied air power was increasing at a significant rate. The actual numbers of combat aircraft in theatre were relatively small in July 1942 but the Japanese and Allies were fairly evenly matched. The Allies adopted an offensive posture which included numerous air attacks against the main Japanese base at Rabaul. For much of 1942 and early 1943, such air raids were very costly and had little, if any, strategic effect. They were essentially another form of attrition, this time in the air.

By June 1943 the actual numbers of combat aircraft in theatre available for operations by both sides had increased substantially; however, despite quite large losses, the Japanese were still able to keep significant numbers of aircraft in the air. Unfortunately for the Japanese, the constant rate of attrition in the air had gone to the core of their air power capability, and from mid-1943 they were increasingly at a loss when trying to train enough pilots for combat, to keep enough aircraft operational, or to resupply their forces with munitions and fuel.

As Allied air power in the SWPA increased the ability to interdict Japanese ground forces also increased in importance. **Air interdiction** is defined as 'operations conducted to destroy, neutralise or delay the enemy's military potential before it can be brought to bear effectively against friendly forces'.[7] Air interdiction was an effective tool for wearing down the Japanese forces. It was used by the Allies to increase the Japanese losses among their air units, their naval units and their ground units. To use an American word, the Japanese were 'attrited' until they reached a point where it was not worth the losses (or the risk of losses) involved in conducting air or naval missions against the Allies. Japanese land forces retained some combat power in defence but their ability to manoeuvre, conduct offensive operations and even to survive as fighting units was severely impaired by the use of interdiction and blockade. Interdiction was directed against ground forces as well as barges, military transport, and infrastructure; however one of the most important targets for air interdiction was Japanese shipping.

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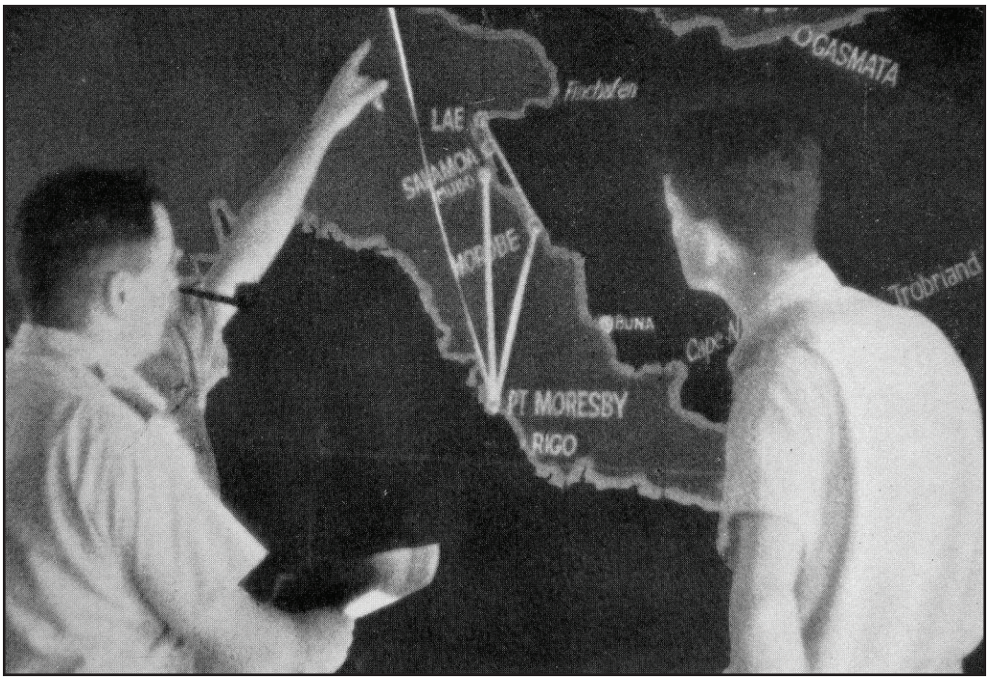
[5] *Australian Maritime Doctrine: RAN Doctrine 1 - 2010*, p. 185.

[6] AAP 1000-D—*The Air Power Manual*, p. 165.

[7] ibid.

The Battle of the Bismarck Sea (2-4 March 1943) was one of the most decisive aerial engagements of the Pacific War. It is also an excellent example of maritime interdiction and as such well worth studying in detail—the reader should refer to my new book *The Battle of the Bismarck Sea, March 1943* for further information about this interesting battle.[8]



Planning New Guinea air operations at Port Moresby

(RAAF)

During January 1943 the Japanese withdrew their forces from Guadalcanal while, at the same time, their defence of Buna also reached its bloody conclusion. The Battle of Wau, which involved the airlift of Australian troops into New Guinea, threatened the southern approaches to the Japanese air base at Lae—situated at the head of the Huon Gulf in central New Guinea. During February the Japanese commanders made arrangements to reinforce their air units and ground forces at Lae by a convoy which was to depart Rabaul and travel through the Bismarck Sea. Japanese plans included up to 100 naval and army aircraft, flying combat air patrols, in daylight, over the convoy. The Allied air forces, under Kenney, were determined to interdict the Japanese convoy and destroy the reinforcements before they could disembark at Lae. The Allies planned a coordinate attack, using about 100 USAAF and RAAF aircraft flying high, medium and low-level strikes against the shipping. They adopted new technologies and methods to increase their chances of hitting the Japanese ships and they practised the coordinated attack against a wreck off Port Moresby.

Air intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) efforts provided the Allies with a significant advantage that effectively set up the actual coordinated air attack. Allied aircraft conducted an offensive counter air mission against the Japanese air base at Lae in an effort to reduce the Japanese ability to interfere with the maritime strike. Also, an early morning torpedo attack against the convoy disrupted the Japanese defences.

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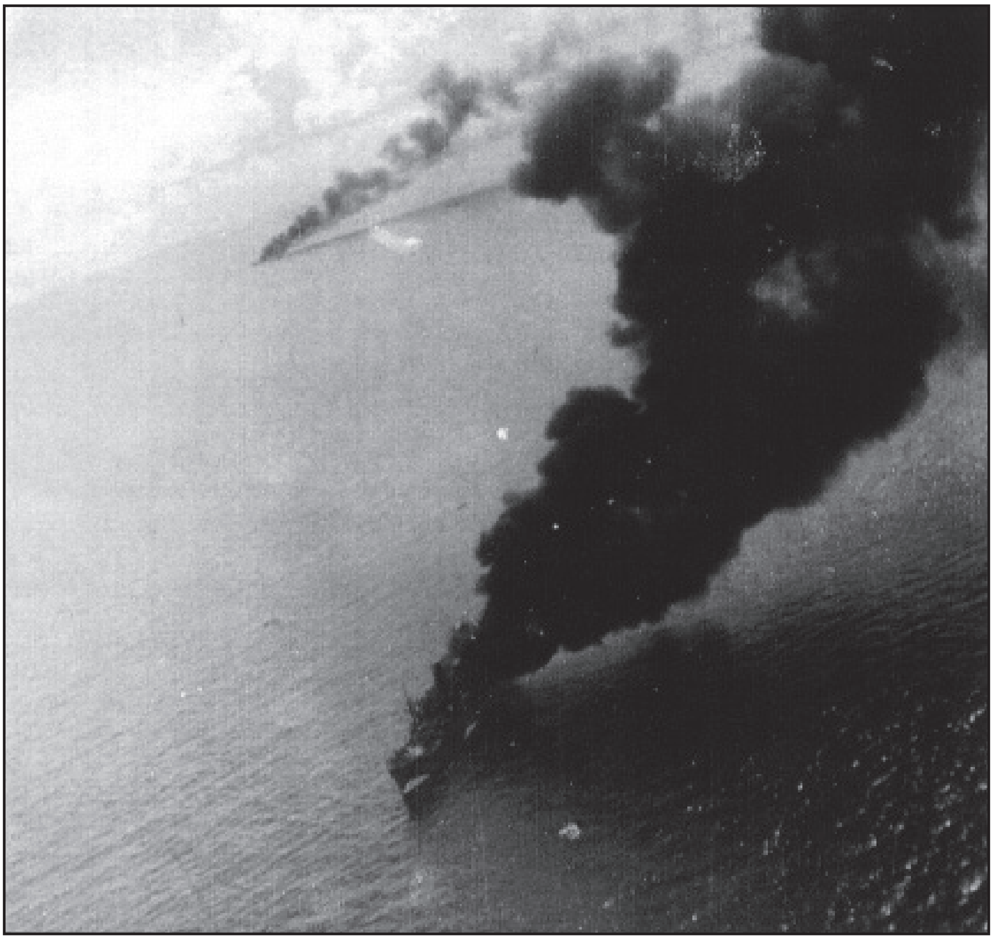
[8] Gregory P. Gilbert, *The Battle of the Bismarck Sea, March 1943*, Air Power Development Centre, Canberra, 2013, available at http://airpower.airforce.gov.au/Publications/Details/514/The-Battle-of-the-Bismarck-Sea.aspx, accessed 6 May 2013.

Mast height view of a Japanese destroyer, taken during the Battle of the Bismarck Sea, 3 March 1943

(RAAF)

At 1000 hours on the morning of 3 March 1943 the Allied coordinate aerial strike force went in. Over the next 15 minutes USAAF B-17 Flying Fortress and B-24 Liberator bombers dropped their bombloads from high level. USAAF P-38 Lightning fighters engaged the Japanese Zeros at high level and, although a few Zeros managed to dive low to defend themselves, the Japanese defensive counter air effort was mostly negated. At the same time, at low level, RAAF Beaufighters and USAAF B25 Mitchells attacked the Japanese ships at mast height, causing significant damage, confusion and panic on the crowded decks. Further attacks by USAAF B-25 Mitchells and A-20 Havocs at medium level dropped bombs which blew apart much of the Japanese convoy shipping's superstructure. The Allied victory at the Battle of the Bismarck Sea was absolute, eight Japanese transport ships and four destroyers were sunk along with 30 aircraft and 3000 troops lost at the cost of six Allied aircraft.



The Japanese convoy attacked during the Battle of the Bismarck Sea, 3 March 1943

(RAAF)

The aftermath of the battle involved Allied air units being ordered to kill all Japanese survivors in the water. This reflected the attitudes of the times where many Australians and Americans who fought in the Pacific War, incensed by reports of Japanese atrocities, truly hated the Japanese. They also believed that if a Japanese soldier or sailor were to get ashore to join the Lae garrison they would fight to the death and most likely take one or two Australians or Americans with them. Of course, in practice, Allied airmen could ignore these orders. Today such orders would amount to a war crime.

The Japanese defeat at the Battle of Bismarck Sea was as much a psychological defeat as a physical one. Even though it was followed by reinforcements numbering 260 aircraft and a renewed air offensive, Operation *I*, the Japanese aircraft were subsequently decimated. By June 1943, the Japanese had lost their ability to contest control of the air over central New Guinea and, having now attained a suitable level of control of the air, Allied offensive operations commenced in earnest.

The Allied offensive phase (June 1943 to September 1945) included the following major operations:

- Woodlark-Kiriwina
- Lae and Salamaua
- Markham Valley and Finschhafen
- New Georgia and Central Solomons
- Bougainville, Green Island and Emirau
- Arawe, Cape Gloucester and Saidor
- Admiralty Islands
- Hollandia, Wakde-Biak, Noemfoor-Sansapor and Morotai

- Battles of the Philippine Sea and Leyte Gulf
- Leyte, Luzon, Southern Philippines
- Borneo—Tarakan, Brunei Bay and Balikpapan

Once again looking at the big picture, there were three main thrusts for the US offensives in the Pacific War. The initial offensives in the SWPA and SOPAC were conducted as contested operations. They were effectively 'slogging matches', instances of attrition warfare, where neither side had a distinct advantage and where neither side had effective air and sea control. By June 1943 the Allies in the SWPA and the SOPAC were able to exercise sufficient air and sea control to successfully use manoeuvre as the foundation of their offensive operations. The Japanese were forced to conduct denial operations.

The air and naval component commanders, General Kenney and Admiral Kincaid, knew that the prerequisite for Allied offensive operations against the Japanese in the SWPA was air and sea control. For this reason they made sure that General MacArthur and his GHQ did what was necessary to achieve these prerequisites. In order to ensure that air operations in support of Allied amphibious operations were not adversely affected by the Japanese, Kenney planned and implemented a running series of offensive counter air missions against the Japanese bases. The Imperial Japanese Army Air Service suffered a decisive blow in August 1943 when the Japanese air base at Wewak was effectively destroyed. By November 1943, after a series of major Allied raids, the Japanese air base at Rabaul was also put out of action. The Allied air attacks against Rabaul, in fact, defeated the core of the Imperial Japanese Navy Air Service. As a result, the Allies achieved air superiority over New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. Subsequent Allied air attacks against Hollandia, between 30 March and 3 April 1944, defeated the Imperial Japanese Army Air Service in the Dutch East Indies. Similar offensive counter air strikes destroyed the remaining Japanese aircraft and bases in the Philippines and Borneo. By achieving air superiority well in advance of the Allied assaults, General Kenney was able to maintain control of the air over the Allied naval and military forces conducting the amphibious operations. It is fair to say that the Allied offensive in the SWPA was led by the air operations.

Allied air attacks against the Japanese air base at Hollandia, March-April 1944

(Source: USAAF)

In summary, there are a number of important lessons to be observed from the air operations in the SWPA 1941-45.

- The SWPA campaign was a maritime campaign—fought in the air, at sea and on land.
- For the Allies, the SWPA campaign transitioned through three phases—from a denial, through a contested, and into an offensive phase.
- Air and sea control cleared the way for amphibious operations.
- Air power could be the key force in the application of military power, with sea and land power used in support.

These observations are really not all that new. Many were recorded in the US official records shortly after the end of World War II; however, they are not well known or often misunderstood within Australia. More recently, in 1988, United States Air Force Colonel John A. Warden III used SWPA air operations as examples in his book *The Air Campaign: Planning for Combat*,[9] and he also recognised the importance of air power as the key force in the SWPA campaign. This observation has become much clearer due to our recent experiences of the application of air power over the last two decades.

As you can see, the SWPA air campaign was noteworthy for its practical lessons on the application of air power. The RAAF learnt much about expeditionary operations during the Pacific War and many of these lessons are relevant for the 21st century ADF. Such lessons are enduring and worthy of study by airmen and women, particularly air commanders, today.

Discussion Period

Unfortunately, the question and answer period was not recorded. However, during the discussions, Principal Air Chaplain Murray Earle, who had known Group Captain William H. ('Bull') Garing personally, described how Garing had always emphasised his and the Australian contribution to the Battle of the Bismarck Sea. He asked whether Garing's repeated claims may have been an over-statement or were they based on fact.

Dr Gilbert replied that he believed that the Australian contribution was indeed significant and, in particular, Garing's influence on the planning for Bismarck Sea was both influential and highly successful.

Postscript

Dr Gilbert's assessment is supported by US historian Thomas E. Griffith:

> As in any battle, several factors contributed to the overwhelming success of the convoy attack. Certainly the earlier experiences played a big role. In particular, the unsuccessful effort against the convoy to Lae in January had emphasized the need to concentrate aircraft to overcome the convoy's air defenses. Group Captain William H. (Bull) Garing, an RAAF pilot who had flown maritime operations for a number of years, convinced Kenney and Whitehead of the need for mass attacks; planning for the Bismarck Sea Battle was done with this aim in mind.[10]

About the Author

Dr Gregory P. Gilbert is the Deputy Director—Research within the Air Power Development Centre. He started his career with Defence as a naval engineer and later worked as an engineering consultant. He rejoined Defence in 2005, working for the Sea Power Centre—Australia. He has published a number of books and numerous articles on military history, including several papers on RAAF history. His latest book *The Battle of the Bismarck Sea, March 1943* was published by the Air Power Development Centre to commemorate the 70th anniversary of that landmark battle.

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[9] John A. Warden III, *The Air Campaign: Planning for Combat*, National Defense University Press, Washington, DC, 1988.

[10] Thomas E. Griffith, Jr., *MacArthur's Airman: General George C. Kenney and the War in the Southwest Pacific*, University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, 1998, p. 107.

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